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STAR CULT AMONG THE PAWNEE—A PRELIMINARY REPORT

By ALICE C. FLETCHER

The far-reaching avenues of trade upon this continent stretch from the equatorial regions to its northern and southern confines, and along these paths have passed with the traders more than their articles of barter. These men took with them the knowledge of rites, customs, myths, and folktales, which spread, with modifying influence more or less enduring, from tribe to tribe. As a result, no one tribe on the western continent can be said to stand wholly apart from all other tribes, or unaffected as to its forms of organization, its culture, or its folklore. A network of exchange, more or less formal, lies over the whole country, enhancing both the difficulty and the interest of ethnological field research.

Some twenty years ago, while studying among the Omaha and other tribes of the Siouan linguistic group, I met with evidence which seemed to indicate that the people of the Pawnee tribe had probably been instrumental in the spread of certain cults among their neighbors, and that this tribe still possessed in considerable fulness of detail many of their ancient ceremonies. Although at that time the way to witness and investigate these ceremonies was opened to me by some of the old Omaha leaders who were in close and friendly relations with the Pawnee, circumstances beyond my control prevented for several years my entering the Pawnee field. However, I have since been able to take up the work and have made considerable progress, having obtained complete records of ceremonies and attendant rituals.

During the present year I have been joined in this investiga-

tion by Dr George A. Dorsey of the Field Columbian Museum, who agrees with me as to the importance of exploiting this field. We hope to procure as complete a record of this tribe as it is now possible to obtain from the few surviving old men who have been instructed in the rites of their fathers. In this associated work Mr James R. Murie, formerly my collaborator, will continue as our assistant in behalf of his tribe.

The language of the Pawnee belongs to the Caddoan stock. When first met by the white race the people were living near Platte river, in what is now the state of Nebraska. About thirty years ago the tribe was removed from this locality to the place where they now reside in northeastern Oklahoma.

In this preliminary report no mention will be made of the earlier or later migrations of the Pawnee, or of the different divisions of the tribe, beyond the statement that it is now represented by four bands. These bands used always to build their villages in a certain definite geographical relation to each other. The Skidi band was always to the west of the others; it is of the organization and cult of this band that a brief outline will be given.

The Skidi band was divided into several villages, each possessing certain sacred symbolic articles which were preserved in a pack or shrine. Each shrine had its own ceremonies and rituals. The sacred symbolic articles, the ceremonial use of them, and the rituals recited or sung were believed to have been given to the different villages by as many different stars. The star gave its name to the shrine, and the name of the shrine became the name of the village. Where there was a second name it referred to some incident connected with the bestowal of the contents of the shrine, or it was descriptive of the locality where the village was placed.

There were five villages which formed a central group (figure 25). The position of these villages was fixed by the position of the stars which had given them their shrines and ceremonies.

About this central group were located the other villages of the

Skidi band, each in a position corresponding to that occupied by the star of its shrine, so that the villages of the Skidi on the earth were as a reflected picture of their stars in the heavens.

In the central group, the shrine of the village at the west led in the religious rites. Its ceremonies were the first to be performed in the yearly sequence of ceremonies, which commenced when the first thunder in the spring was heard. All but two of the villages took part in these ceremonies, following a certain order.

Not only did the ceremony of the shrine of the village of the west open the rites of the year, but certain of its ritual songs were repeated at the beginning of the ceremonies connected with the shrines of the other villages taking part. To quote the words of my Indian informant, "the ceremonies of the other shrines were like branches of this shrine." This shrine did not have anything to do with secular affairs unless the people were in dire distress.

The ceremonies connected with the shrines of the other four villages of the central group related to the affairs of the tribe, such as hunting, planting and harvesting, the conferring of honors on warriors, and the installation of leaders. The leadership of these shrines rotated in a fixed order. That of the village at the northwest became the leader for the year, that is, a winter and a summer. Then the leadership passed to the village at the southeast, for a winter and a summer. Next came the shrine of the village at the southwest, which led for a year, a winter and a summer, when the leadership fell to the shrine of the village of the northeast, a winter and a summer. After that the leadership returned to the shrine of the village at the northwest, and so on, following the order as given, each shrine being leader every four years.

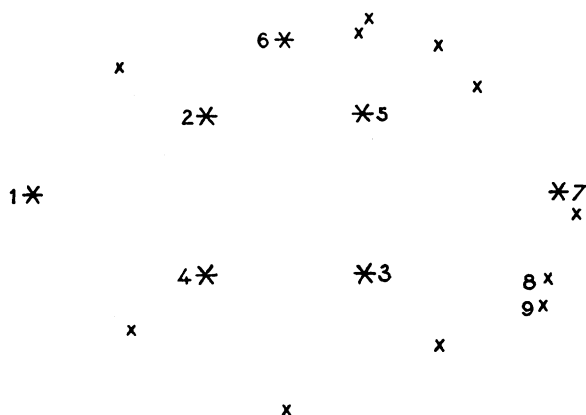
Quoting again my Indian informant, "The Skidi were organized by the stars; these powers above made them into families and villages, and taught them how to live and how to perform

their ceremonies. The shrines of the four leading villages were given by the four leading stars, and represent those stars which guide and rule the people. The shrine of the village at the west was given by Tiráwa, who is above and over all the stars, hence it is over all the others which were given by the stars. That is why all the ceremonies of the other shrines began with the sacred songs of this shrine. Tiráwa sent this shrine by the star in the west, but it was not to represent that star, but to represent Tiráwa who gave to the mysterious beings, who stand below that star, the power to put life into all things, to set the people in order, and to give them knowledge." He further explained: "First of all was Tiráwa-atius (*a-ti-us*, father), the power above all and over all, the father of all things. Then came the lesser or under powers; these were given places in the heavens; they are in stars. Then all things were made, and men and women were created." Again I quote: "The ceremonies of the shrines give an account of creation, the establishment of the family, and the inauguration of rites by which man would be reminded of his dependence on Tiráwa, of whom he must ask food."

One of the fundamental teachings of these ceremonies is the predication of a duality of the universe. Everything is either male or female; these two principles were necessary to the perpetuation of all things. The east was male, the west was female, the south was male, the north female, the above was male, and the below female. Therefore all the stars in the east were male, and all the stars in the west were female. This quality was imparted to the shrines: that of the west was feminine; so, too, was the shrine of the yellow star at the northwest, which was the first in order of leadership; next in the order was the shrine of the red masculine star in the southeast. The leadership then came to the white feminine star in the southwest, and the following year passed to the shrine of the black masculine star of the northeast. These diagonally situated stars were sometimes spoken of as in "pairs" or "mates."

The care of these shrines was deputed to a woman, the knowledge of its contents, ceremonies, and rituals, to a man.

The sequence of the ceremonies began with those of the star in the west, through which, I was told, "the life-giving power of Tiráwa-atius passed, coming from the west to all living forms." After the ceremony of the star in the west the next in order was the ceremony of the shrine of the village which was leader for the year; the other three villages of this central group sometimes joining, and in that case acting as a unit. The general progress



1 Star of the West.

6 North Star.

2,3,4,5 Four leading Stars.

7 Morning Star.

FIG. 25—Villages of the Skidi band. (The position of four villages is not represented in the diagram.)

was from west to east, and the sequence closed with that of the shrine of the morning star, which included a sacrifice typifying the conjunction of the east and the west, the below and the above, thus insuring the perpetuity and productivity of all forms of life.

The two villages marked 8 and 9 in figure 25 were not included in this sequence, for the reason that their shrines, while connected with stars, were more intimately associated with the animal forms of the earth. They had their special rites, which

included many of the remarkable feats of sleight-of-hand for which the Pawnee have been celebrated.

The influence of star cult was manifest in the construction of the earth-lodge of the Pawnee. The circular floor of this dwelling symbolized the earth, and the dome-shaped roof the arching sky. The four posts which supported the framework of the roof represented the four stars of the leading villages, and on occasions

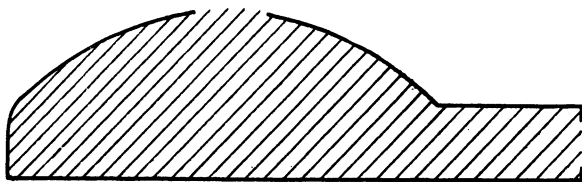


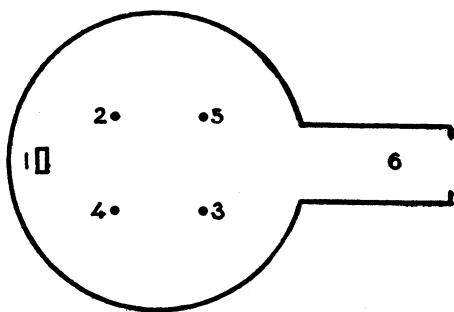
FIG. 26—Section of an earth-lodge.

were painted their respective colors. The place of a shrine was at the west, in accordance with the position of the star of the west (figures 26, 27).

No further mention at this time can be made of the elaborate rites attending the construction of these earth-lodges, nor of their manifold symbolism; nor can other ceremonies relating to stars be spoken of, nor the many ways in which stars were supposed to influence the lives of the people.

As to the identification of the stars which control the position and ceremonies of the villages composing the Skidi band,

with any known constellation, only the north star (to which belong certain ceremonies connected with the chiefs) and the morning star can be pointed out by the Skidi. The central group—the



1 Shrine in the West.
2, 3, 4, 5 Posts.
6 Entrance way.

FIG. 27—Ground plan of earth-lodge.

four leading stars—seem to suggest the four in the body of Ursa Major, but if they ever had any connection with that constellation it appears to be lost. At least that is the conclusion to which present knowledge points; further study may throw light on the identification of this group. The fact that the position of the stars which still exercise so controlling an influence is lost, indicates that we have here traces of an ancient and deeply rooted cult.